

# SOME BAD NEWS

NEW YORK — To those of you who work making exhibition catalogues for art museums: YOUR JOBS WILL BE ELIMINATED IMMEDIATELY.

OK, maybe not immediately. But exhibition catalogues are a doomed genre. They are prohibitively expensive for many yet fail to be a desirable luxury good. They purvey knowledge in a middling way, insufficient both in advancing the field and educating the uninformed. They are heavy in an age of weightlessness. They appeal to a Western middle-class ideal at a time when the middle class is, in the West, disappearing.

It is incorrect to say, as the postmodern-technological theorists of the '80s and '90s did, that we exist in a world of increasing dematerialization. Rather, we live in an age that concentrates at either end of the spectrum: dematerialization and rematerialization. (For an intriguing possible analogy, see Deleuze and Guattari on deterritorialization / reterritorialization.) Financial transactions are accomplished by waving a credit card as you exit a store, or else you buy gold bullion at a thousand dollars an ounce and rising. Artworks are increasingly intangible, “projects” that create social contexts or serve as means of dispersal (pedagogy as artwork, mailing list as artwork, and of course pad thai as artwork); or else artworks take the forms of the *objets* that dominate art fairs — paintings attractive to various aesthetics and diamond-encrusted human skulls.

Books occupy an intermediate point on the spectrum of materiality, and as we know from American politics, the middle ground is in any situation difficult to hold. Print publishing's discontents are well known. At its ethereal end, that of newspapers, the territory has sheared off, like California into the ocean after the mythic quake. (Perhaps the fate of the *Los Angeles Times* brings this metaphor to mind?) Magazines are following swiftly behind. We can mythologize our romantic associations — the gritty feeling of ink on your hands with the tack of the daily news, coated stock shining in your eye with fashion, celebrity, and “lifestyle” itself imbued with glamour — but there is nothing essential or even lasting about these connotations and the metaphors they have engendered. All the information these publications contain is pouring into screens while we, who produce this information, struggle to find new ways to make a living from it.

At the other end of the material spectrum, meanwhile, the ground falls away as well. Hardcover fiction is less simple and satisfying way of experiencing a story than a movie, and even with nonfiction, books are too bulky and costly given the meager things they contain: line upon line of print or grainy reproductions. Paperbacks occupy a middle ground, and the mass-market manifestations will probably be the only print books to survive for any period of time, since their compact size and price seems to match consumers' needs and their valuation of the contents. Children's books too seem viable, since the definition and form of “book” for children is much more flexible, and since societally we

are still cognizant of the fact that books are, like milk, good for children.

Exhibition catalogues and their kin, art books, are situated further toward the material end of the spectrum than regular hardcovers. When this materiality is embraced, the results may be profitable: special editions of art books, usually bearing artists' signatures and production geegaws, have proliferated in recent years. Or the recently conceived megabook: limited-run, sumptuously produced coffee table books at times the literal size of a coffee table that flaunt their objecthood in every detail. Such books retail for as much as \$15,000; all in all, they are closer to an experience (and therefore appear closer to the creative font, the artist) than a mere book. They are Bush-era in conception, and just as the art economy has slumped but avoided the total collapse of other sectors — the rich are still rich — well-targeted luxury goods may be a survival route for art publishing.

The problem with this scenario is that books, magazines, and newspapers are not conceived as luxury goods. Quite the opposite: they are, since Gutenberg, democratic in conception and effect, and in the modern West, their fate paralleled that of the middle class. Their economics as historically construed rely on many readers purchasing books at affordable prices. And museums, of course, tend to think of themselves as having an educational mission that is also populist and democratic.

In museum publishing wings, the confluence of these traits and the inevitable large-institutional inertia, results in a situation in which museum publishing lacks logic — it has failed to move in directions that current patterns of information dispersal would warrant: greater niching and greater flexibility in terms of product format. Toward this end, THE EXHIBITION CATALOGUE FORMAT MUST BE ABANDONED.

To understand why, we must look at the audience of the museum, and the readership and potential readership for their books. Who might buy an exhibition catalogue?

Museums have traditionally and quite reasonably relied on those who enter onto their physical premises as the primary market for their products. (Accompanying and perhaps unfortunately entrenching this reliance, the marketing of catalogues outside the museum's own bookshops — to "the trade" — is typically tepid.) A high percentage of exhibition attendance can be attributed to THE TOURIST. A great percentage of Tourists — in New York, at least — are foreign. Catalogues are a type of souvenir — a very heavy souvenir, and shipping adds to the product's cost. If museum visitors are on holiday, they likely desire not souvenirs of a particular art experience but of a happy moment, and their association of that sensation with a particular artist or exhibition is much less well appealed to by a thick catalogue than by a lightweight consumer product to pack into their suitcases — jewelry, a mouse pad, or, potentially more informatively, a DVD. (Another key subset of museum visitors are children, especially in school groups, are not likely purchasers of exhibition catalogues, so I'll neglect THE CHILD for now.)

Next comes THE VISITOR — perhaps more local or regional, the Visitor makes a

few trips to museums each year; he/she is a casual fan who like culture generally speaking; likes to have it around, be associated with it, and who has a more or less sophisticated appreciation of it. The Visitor may want a catalogue that (as for tourists) reminds them of a happy visit and that explains to them a bit what the art is about; he/she might actually want to read. But if the Visitor begins to read the essays in an exhibition catalogue, typically they find expressed the outlook of the curator who organized the show, which, however much he or she tries to make accessible writing a goal, fails to purvey the information with the ease and simplicity, or juice and entertainment, of an NPR program, a PBS documentary, or even a good nonfiction book.

Perhaps the only people who might still use the exhibition catalogue as traditionally construed are the third and final audience segment – THE SPECIALIST: the professor, artist, critic, or hardcore fan. The Specialist truly desires the catalogue as a format for the display of sumptuous reproductions of artwork images and the conveyance of high levels of scholarship and authoritative information. But catering via exhibition catalogue to this group — to which, of course, belong the producers of the book, the curators and editors, who may not be able to perceive their own biases or else are variously indifferent to them — cripples the ability to better serve other, larger audiences.

Some solutions to this problem are obvious. The first is to abandon the exhibition catalogue as currently conceived. Only the Specialist requires the essays that are published within, which to laypeople seem arcane and potentially off-putting. Why not, then, detach these texts from the reproductions of artworks? To save the exhibition catalogue, publish it in a two-volume set: the book of sumptuous images with abbreviated texts akin to what might appear on gallery walls and the book of erudite essays that are keyed to it. The Specialist will want and purchase both, and in any sort of marketplace, offering more options — creating a greater possibility that a product fits precisely the desires of a specific customer — results in greater overall sales.

Electronic forms, too, should be embraced. E-books constitute a rare bright spot for publishing: sales of readers like the Kindle and books for them are strong, and studies indicate that those who own electronic reading devices read more books per year than they did before. The physical bulk of a book is no attraction to tourists who must get it to their distant home or to casual fans who want information and edification in a usable format. As rich repositories of images, catalogues are eminently browsable, and museums would be well served by taking advantage of the browsing, multi-track style of reading that computer culture promotes by breaking the books into small, cheap pieces. For plate sections and scholarly essays alike, museums could easily adopt an iTunes model whereby they sell individual components for download. A particularly gorgeous Richter or intriguing Smithsonian could be hot-linked to a catalogue essay by Benjamin Buchloh or Rosalind Krauss. Even when content is available elsewhere for free, impulse is king: if something is easy for consumers to purchase, they are much more likely to do so.

A knee-jerk objection by purists might be that e-reading devices are incapable of good image reproduction. True enough in the short run, but technology advances swiftly and inevitably. Today almost all cell phones feature still cameras and many feature video; HD video is here now, HHD is following fast on its heels, and surely HHHH will be arriving soon after that. Similar improvements in computer monitors and e-book readers will not lag. In the meantime, it makes no sense to wait for perfection.

Plenty of other difficulties present themselves; resources for entirely retooling are, at the moment, limited, and institutional resistance cannot be underestimated, least of all by those who run and work in museum publishing departments themselves. But if their livelihood comes into question, those who produce books will become capable of admitting that the physical form of the literature that accompanies an exhibition is inevitably becoming more mutable. The final obstacle will be those who make and select the art. In the end, artists and curators, who might be expected to have the most progressive attitudes toward the course of culture and its channels of dissemination, might pose the greatest hurdles to saving museum publishing. The hardcover museum exhibition catalogue is a symbol of what it means to have a museum show — of what it means to be a success. Soon, however, it will become a symbol of clinging to the past. And then it will simply disappear. (DA) ■